1**Interview with HMC Lou Legarie, Vietnam hospital corpsman assigned to 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines. Interviewed by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Navy Medical Department, 8 April 2005.**

Where are you from originally?
Rhode Island.

That didn't sound like a California accent to me.
I've been here for many years, plus Hawaii.

So you were born in Rhode Island?
Yes, I was born in 1925.

What town were you from?
Warwick, right below Providence.

Oh, yes, I know where that is. I went to school in New England, myself.
Oh, you did?

New Hampshire, yes.
I have a good doctor friend up there in New Hampshire. He's Dr. Shumaker; I think he's from probably a nice little town, Claremont.

When did you decide you wanted to join the Navy?
I joined the Marine Corps first but I was put out because I was kind of young. It was World War II. In '42 they put you on a list and then you'd wait until they'd call you when their quota filled or something like this.

Yes.
I waited and waiting and I signed the chief of police's name, which was Harland Moffit, which I have a good memory, and then I had tried my father's name and few other people. I was going to get sworn in in Boston. But they called me for it and put me out. And so they put me on a quota. Then they called me and the next thing they wanted me to come in the Navy and I said oh shit, I don't want to go in the Navy. And they said, "Well, the quota for the Marine Corps is going to be a few more months." So my father said, "You better go there."

Anyhow I went in the Navy. The next thing I raised hell on the ship there and I talked to this Navy captain. I was his orderly. He told me that his brother was in the Marine Corps. I said, "Oh that's nice."

He said, "I can get you with the Marine Corps."

I said, "You can?"

"Yes, okay." So that's when he sent me to Field Med School with the Marine Corps. So I stayed with them quite a few years.

Yes, but you were still in the Navy. You weren't in the Marines, but you might as well have been with the Marines, right?

Yes, in fact, when I went in the Marine Corps, they had a parade for me in my honor at 8th and I Street, so they treated me pretty nice. Great. They're nice though. When I go to Hawaii all the Marines have big parties for me at the O Club. In fact, they named a room after me at the officer's club.

Oh, did they?

Yes, and I said you should have named a goddam head after me. What do you do? Are you a doctor or something?

I'm the historian for the Medical Department. I work for the Surgeon General.

Is that right?

Roger Ware said I should ask you about your career in the Navy. So you went to Field Med School?

Yes.

I**n Pendleton or…**

Camp Pendleton, yes. It used to be a raider school and then they changed it to Field Med School.

So when was that in '43?

Yes. Well, I went to Camp Lejeune first in North Carolina and then rode a train across country to Field Med School at Camp Pendleton.

What was your first assignment after you got out of Field Med School?

I was sent to Guam. We went on a replacement draft because we were either going to Guam or Okinawa. We landed in Guam and then the war ended. We went on patrols and stuff like that.

Then we went into Japan. Then we turned around and went to China to repatriate the Japanese from China back to Japan. I stayed there for almost 4 years.

In China?

Yes. I was with the 4th Marines, 6th Division. I was with the Recons, 6th Recons and stuff like that.

So what kind of stuff were you doing there with the Marines?

I was doing the medical aspect of it as a corpsman with company aid. When I was Recon, I was company aid man. Then I became first class. I almost had a battalion aid station. I went up to Tientsin and up to Peking, then came back down Tientsin. Then I went down to Tsingtao and took over

the 3rd Marines, where I had another battalion aid station. And that's kind of where it goes--mostly battalion aid station, company aid man and so with the company.

Where you'd go after you were in China?

When I came out of China, I went to the Department of the Pacific in San Francisco, which was the Marine Corps Headquarters.

It was called the Department of the Pacific?

Yes. And then Korea broke out, and I went to Camp Pendleton. I detailed all corpsmen to the 7th Marines because that's all we had left. And then we had a problem over there at one of the battalions so a major came over and he said, "Are you Lou Legarie?"

I said, "Yes, sir."

He said, "You know who I am?"

I said, "I don't know. You look familiar, but I don't know who you are." He said, "I'm Ben Reed."

I said, "Well, Ben Reed used to be the aide to General [Lemuel] Shepherd in China."

He said, "Yes. I remember you."

He said, "I want you to go to my battalion."

I said, "I'm sorry, sir. I'm going with 1/7."

He said, "No, I can take care of it." Well, he used to be General Shepherd's aide. So he took care of that fast.

That's Lemuel Shepherd, right?

Yes. In fact, I was with them and then I was with his son, Lemuel C. Shepherd III. I was in with his company in China. And then I knew all the Shepherds. I knew their daughter, Virginia. She was married to a Marine colonel, Ord, so I kind of knew the family very well. I served with the family or different people in the family.

After that, I went to Korea and was at Inchon, Pusan, and at the Han River. I went up to Seoul, and then we came back down to Inchon. After that we boarded some LSTs for about 10 days. We didn't know where we were going. We finally ended up going to the Chosin Reservoir in November '50.

Then we moved out on December 5th. I was wounded there. I didn't want to be evacuated. I said, "Shit, they have too many wounded Marines here." So I stayed with them; they got treated. When I there, I went to back to Camp Pendleton as an instructor at the combat field med school there.

Then I left to go to Okinawa. From Okinawa I went to the 1st Marine Brigade, the second time with the 4th Marines. I ended up going to Vietnam with 2/5. [Roger] Ware was a company corpsman who was with me. I had about 50 to 55 corpsmen there.

So what was your title there when you were in Vietnam?
My title?

Yes, did you have…
Yes, I was Chief of the battalion aid station of 2/5.

And what year was that?
1967. I went on quite a few operations there, Union 1 and Union 2. But my main job was running the battalion aid station. I rebuilt the place and got it squared away. I had 50 some corpsmen, maybe 55, maybe sometimes it got a little higher. We lost a lot in different operations. I had a fantastic battalion aid station. In fact, the CG at 1st Division, Don Robinson, used me as an example. My battalion aid station he said was typical, which was a bunch of bull, because I made that into kind of a showplace. Plus I'd support all these Marine units. I had great corpsmen. I trained them pretty good. I was tough on them, but I got the best out of them.

They were trained when they came to Vietnam, but what did you do to…
Yes, but I motivated them. They were worried about combat because they had never seen it. But I was in it myself a few times. I kind of kept them up in the companies a little longer than 3 or 4 months. I'd keep them up there 6 or 7 months because we were kind of short. But I talked to them and told them the facts of life and what to do in emergencies.

I was very highly motivated on emergency procedure and stuff like that, so I'd work with them and evidently they responded and got to become real good corpsmen. Roger [Ware] stayed in and became a physician's assistant. He blames me for him staying in the Navy for that long, but I was a tough guy. I'm still a tough guy, but the thing is, I kept them busy all the time. I didn't want them to feel sorry for themselves, so I kept them that way. They were pretty appreciative.

Tell me about Hué City. That was a pretty big deal with all the urban fighting. That was totally different from what people were used to doing there.
That's the first thing. There was a big difference between that battle and what we had in An Hoa. An Hoa was all Indian country. We were hit all the time down there. Down there they had a lot of mines and booby traps and people were getting their legs and parts of their bodies blown off. So naturally the morale was bad. They tiptoed around those places.

Anyhow, once we get up to Hué City it was all cobblestoned streets so the enemy couldn't put booby traps and mines there. And because nobody was getting blown up by mines, the morale went sky high.

We were kind of short so we had to pick up a battalion surgeon. Unfortunately, I can't remember his name. In an infantry battalion, we

rated two battalion surgeons and 50 corpsmen. But we were short because many of the corpsmen had been killed or wounded. And it was not easy to get replacements right away because everyone was having their problems.

So you were really responsible for assigning the corpsmen to the different companies.

Yes. That was my job. We had three companies up in Hué City one was in reserve. We had an awful lot of casualties. Every day we had 40 or 50 men wounded. I set up a battalion aid station, where we took care of the casualties.

What did the battalion aid station look like?

It was an advanced battalion aid station in somebody's house. It was the first deck of an apartment house. I'd see most of the casualties who came in. We'd take all their clothes off and make sure they didn't have any wounds we didn't know about. We did triage and after treating the ones we thought were going to make it, we then moved them out of there any way we could. We had a big truck which we used to evacuate them to LZ, which was a soccer field near the Perfume River. On one occasion, a mortar came in right on top of a truck filled with casualties. So that was kind of demoralizing. After that I kept moving the vehicles around. I told this driver, "Let's get these vehicles away from each other. Keep one here, one over there." So it worked out pretty well. Those are the kinds of things you learn in the field. I learned a lot of tricks of the trade.

Did you have stretchers set on saw horses?

We had things that would hold the stretchers but sometimes we lay them right down on the deck because we had so many of them. I had casualties coming in all the time.

Did you have IV fluids like Ringers and serum albumin?

Yes. We had saline and things like that.

How many corpsmen did you have working in that battalion aid station you just described?

About eight to ten. And sometimes I used company aid men if they were close by. I used anyone I could get hold of. At the beginning, I had about 55 corpsmen. Then we started losing a lot of them. I had people there at Hué City who had earned three Purple Hearts and were supposed to leave the country. But I had to use them. If you had three Purple Hearts you had to get out of country but you had to wait till you got a letter telling you to go back to Danang to leave.

What I tried to do was get the most out of them so they wouldn't feel sorry for themselves. So I kept them there. And it worked out well because we treated a lot of casualties. By that time those guys knew what they were doing. Those corpsmen were pretty smart individuals and highly motivated;

they knew how to do emergency medical treatment. But I was tough on them. Let me tell you, I was tough on them.

Was there anything different about treating the casualties in Hué as opposed to treating them anywhere else, except for the booby trap thing you mentioned?

Take, for instance, Chosin Reservoir. At Chosin Reservoir we were all cold and everybody was freezing. But that helped us a little bit because when a person was wounded, the blood would coagulate. The man wouldn't be bleeding like if he was in warm weather or something like that. So that stopped the heavy bleeding. But to give them morphine we had to put the morphine in our mouth because it was frozen. So we had to wait until it was thawed out, if they were going to give them a shot of morphine.

And under these adverse conditions because they were out in the open and people are freezing. I would take my clothes off, whatever I had and throw them on the casualty to keep them warm and stuff. I had sometimes 35 casualties at one time. But the point is to try not to have them bleed to death and go into shock.

But when I went to Vietnam, it was different. When a guy got wounded, you'd call for medevac and get him right out of there. If he had a head wound, you could say, "Okay, we're going to send him to Marble Mountain." If a guy had this kind of wound, you send him there.

When you say Marble Mountain, you're talking about Danang, the Station Hospital?

Yes.

NSA, right?

Yes. I also trained corpsmen to do the medevacs. Every time somebody got hurt or wounded at night, it was pretty tough for those helicopters to fly at night because they would crash into the mountains.

So I taught my corpsmen to check their patients and make sure their pulse or respiration was within limits. If the patient was stable, there was no need to call a medevac. He was going to live anyhow, so why call every time. A lot of times the medevacs couldn't get in anyway because it was 2 or 3 in the morning. So that's what they learned.

Were you in Hué when Ron Christmas was hit?

Yes. He was hit pretty heavy in the face and the legs. He was the company commander for Hotel Company. We had three companies. Christmas was new. I think he joined us at Phu Bai. I had seen him there because I used to meet all the company commanders when they came down to my battalion aid station. Ron Christmas was a dynamic company commander. He was born to be a company commander. He was great.

Well, I actually talked to General Christmas and he told me he remembers being loaded onboard some kind of a truck or something. When he got to Danang, he ended up on the Air Force side of the base and got lost over there. Nobody knew where the hell he was.

That's true. Once they were evacuated, you never knew where they hell they'd go.

Do you ever stay in touch with any of those corpsmen you were with at Hué City?

Not too many, not too many.

Are there any corpsmen that you know that I should maybe talk to, to ask them about Hué City that may have been there with you?

Well, let me see. I have one guy named Lansbury who lives in Philadelphia, but I don't know whether he was in Hué. I have his number here; 215-464-1284.

Well, that was probably a heck of a responsibility to have to be putting corpsmen in harm's way like that all the time.

I did very well. I was decorated and so forth and was never wounded. I kept a corpsman up in the company for 6 months versus 4 months because I wanted the Marines to get used to that person and for him to get used to them. And that way, he'd become very effective because they depended on him. But when you keep changing them back and forth, they would say, "What the hell's going on?"

That's the Marine philosophy. That's how they think. A lot of the corpsmen who stayed longer began enjoyed working in that company because they stayed there longer and got used to it. And, of course, some of them were killed. So I'm not sure if I felt guilty about that or not.

The point is my job there was to support the Marines, the wounded, and the sick. The point is that it was very effective and the battalion COs were happy about that. I kept up with the corpsmen, checked them all the time in their companies to see how they were doing. And if they had problems, I tried to help them.

One of the great battalion commanders in Hué City was Ernie Cheatham. He led the attack up there and got a Navy Cross. He really appreciated what I did up there and what I did for the corpsmen. I was very, very strong dealing with the casualties. I knew every trick of the trade. When we had medical teams come in, I assigned the corpsmen to that with the battalion aid station.

How long were you in Vietnam?

I was there for 13 months.

When did you leave?

I left there in ’68 and then I was assigned to the hospital. I was supposed to go to Coronado with the Troop Training Unit with the Marine Corps, but they changed my orders to the 1st Marine Brigade, so I went to the 1st Marine Brigade in Hawaii.

Is that where you retired from?
Yes, sir.

When was that?
In ’72.

What was your rate when you retired?
I was a chief.

So you had been in the Navy for a good long time.
Yes, 30 years.

What do you do now?
I work at DMV.

Motor Vehicle?
Yes. I’ve hit 80 years old and I’m still working.

Is that right? You’re 80 years old?
Yes.

And you’re still working?
Yes.

That’s great. Let me ask you this, it’s been a lot of years since you were in Viet Nam, do you ever think about it much anymore?
Well, when you go to treat a guy that’s about ready to die, he’ll start telling you all his problems in his family and he wants you to go visit them. And you wonder, could I have saved him? And that bothers me a lot.

But, do I think about it? Once in a while I wonder what the guys are doing because I hear from a lot of people--Marines from Hué City and Vietnam. And I never keep too much contact with them.

Do you belong to the 2/5 organization?
Yes. I belong to the China Marines. I belong to the Chosin Reservoir Reunion group, the 1st Marine Division Association, and then I belong to the 2/5. Sometimes they’ll have what they call a reunion, so I’ll attend those. I just came back from the Chosin Reservoir one. I met a lot of people I was with, but there aren’t too many people now. But it’s the Chosin Less I call it, not the Chosin Few, because they’re getting less and less. We had about

2,000 including the wives I guess. It's a great reunion because you see people. They're very friendly and very appreciative.

A lot of us have the cold weather syndromes and I got that and I go to the VA now, but I told them I've been hurting lately so I want to see about being taken care of, because I never asked for much. I have never used the word combat or war or something. I just do my job. When I wash a car, I do it good. Anything I do, I do it well. I didn't want anybody feeling sorry for me and a lot of people wanted to, but not me.

I'm in great shape by the way. They say, "What do you take?" And I tell them Metamucil or something. But getting back to all this stuff, once in a while I think about Vietnam now and then, yes. I never let the Medical Department down because I knew what I was doing. I wasn't the sharpest knife, but I knew exactly what direction I was going in and what I could do for casualties. I also got a Silver Star and Bronze Star so it worked out pretty good.

I need your address so when I do the transcript I can send it to you for you to look at.

Sure. 449 Falk Court, Menlo Park, CA 94025

Got it.

I don't know if I was any help to you, but…

Oh you were a great help and I appreciate you spending time with me today.

Well, I appreciate you giving me a call here.

Take care of yourself and again thank you very much.

Have a wonderful day.

You too.

Thanks for taking the time.